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## **Sport Horse Leisure and the Phenomenology of Interspecies Embodiment**

**Abstract:** This article presents an auto-ethnography of the experience of sport horse riding.

Drawing on phenomenological and anthropological theories of embodiment, I argue that the aspirational goal of sport riding is co-embodiment between horse and human, in which kinesthetic perception, intention, and volition merge. Co-embodiment requires time and practice to develop a shared multi-species culture in which bodies can be attuned to one another, and profound attention to both the immediate moment and the other being. I suggest that the interspecies component of sport riding, and the sport component of the interspecies engagement, is a significant part of what makes it appealing as a leisure activity. It invites (and requires) an experience of corporeal immediacy and intimacy that is both deeply satisfying and absent from many work or social environments in contemporary, wealthy, Western societies. Methodologically, this article draws from two decades of personal experience in sport horse riding, and engages auto-ethnography as a way to use the researcher's body as phenomenological tool while keeping broader cultural contexts in mind. (180/200)

**Keywords:** *horse riding, sport, embodiment, multi-species, phenomenology, auto-ethnography*

### **Introduction:**

Leisure is something other than the demands of work, and in some cases other than the demands of social life. Sport horse riding has been a favorite leisure activity of mine for two decades now, and has many times transgressed the border with both work and socializing, as I was paid to teach lessons, coach competitors, do barn chores, and train and exercise other people's horses, and maintained friendships and social networks in the equestrian world. Yet its draw has always been something other than payment or interpersonal connections. By exploring what I find to be the most compelling aspect of riding, which I call interspecies co-embodiment, I discuss the unique role equestrian sports play in leisure culture. In this auto-ethnographic paper, I draw from philosophy and anthropology to think through the phenomenology and cultural

relevance of intentional co-embodiment with a non-human, arguing that the immediacy and intimacy such connections facilitate play a role in the pleasure of the sport as leisure.

Achieving interspecies co-embodiment is the result of long practice and keenly developed intuition. Although often fleeting and aspirational, it is an experience of profound immediacy that I experience as an antidote to the distraction and anxiety that permeates the information-based academic world where I otherwise work. One must be ‘present’ to connect on this level with an animal. Sharing embodied awareness across species also provides a bodily intimacy that is not generally found in social or individual leisure pursuits or work endeavors. Both this immediacy and intimacy are enabled by, and require, embodied attention. I suggest that engaging with another species facilitates and enhances our capacities for embodied attention, and that this is a key component of sport riding as leisure. Co-embodiment is a theme in my primary ethnographic research on childbearing, including pregnancy, birth, and infant care, and my other leisure pastime of partnered dance, though in neither of these contexts is it interspecies. In this paper I highlight what makes the interspecies component of co-embodiment unique and important in constituting sport riding *as* leisure. Ultimately, I suggest that the role of horses in leisure landscapes serves to legitimate and encourage attention to corporeal experience in ways that are absent from many ‘work’ environments, as well as many human social ones.

**Method:**

Sport riding typically includes the Olympic disciplines of dressage, eventing, and show jumping, which are the styles of riding in which I have experience. The category could easily be extended to include other traditions, from endurance riding to Western cutting or reining. For the

purposes of this article, the key aspect of ‘sport riding’ is that horse and rider are united to accomplish an activity that is physically and mentally challenging for them both. In this paper I draw from my equestrian experience in Northern California and the Chicago area over two decades (1998-2018), from beginner to quasi-professional. During this period I was involved with ten different barns, took and taught lessons, competed locally and regionally, and coached students at shows. I exercised and trained countless horses, including two that I owned and two that I leased, started several young horses who had never been ridden, and spent a few summers as a ‘working student’ (similar to an apprentice or intern). Generalizations drawn from my experience necessarily speak to wealthy Western societies and the United States in particular. My conception of sport riding is closer to the ‘natural horsemanship’ that Latimer and Birke (2009) distinguish from ‘traditional rural communities’ in the UK, in which the former seek a dyadic and mutual relationship with minimal coercion or force, and the latter approach equine sport and competition as a way of life. However, in the US the term ‘natural horsemanship’ connotes a specific cultural community distinct from sport riding; my riding practice might better be described as ‘ethical equitation’ (McLean and McGreevy 2010) based on traditional European training principles.

Auto-ethnography is a particularly suitable method for making these claims. To understand how riding *is* (phenomenologically) and therefore how it can be understood as co-embodiment, it must be experienced. In positing a theoretical framework and methodology for describing and analyzing embodied life, Deidre Sklar (1994) claims that the researcher’s own body is a point of access to corporeal knowledge in cultural practice. She insists that such research must be practiced; it is not enough to observe, because the embodied experience of

something yields more than ‘meets the eye’. Although vision is the privileged form of experience in the West, much somatic experience exceeds the visual, or even the perceptual. Sklar writes, ‘It is a matter of re-cognizing kinesthetically what is perceived visually, aurally, or tactilely’ (p.15). My extensive kinesthetic experience of sport riding enables me to understand the claims I am presenting on a deep corporeal level, which is in fact what enables me to make them. If I were working from interviews, I would likely be able to piece together similar understandings of the experience of riding, but being the theorist *and* the body in question offers a particularly poignant perspective.

Deborah Butler (2017) has advocated a similar ‘autophenomenography’ to apply phenomenology within the sociology of horse racing as both a methodological approach and a theoretical framework, focused on ‘the researcher’s own lived experience of a phenomenon’ (p. 125; see Allen-Collinson 2011 for a more general use of the term in sports analysis). I use ‘auto-ethnography’ instead because, in addition to being a more approachable term, it is less constrained to phenomenology and more engaged with broader anthropological discussions of culture. Thomas Csordas’ (1993) conceives of embodiment and somatic attention as an essential methodological complement to semiotic analyses of culture-as-meaning. He subsumes phenomenological approaches within ‘embodiment’ as a methodological field, arguing that ‘perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world... is the starting point for analyzing human participation in a cultural world’ (p. 135). For him, embodiment is ‘a dialectic between perceptual consciousness and collective practice (p. 137). Because my goal is to draw from phenomenology in order to theorize culture, including from a multi-species perspective, thinking in terms of ethnography is more appropriately capacious. The italicized

descriptions below are composites of my memories and serve as auto-ethnographic ‘data’. This approach has obvious limitations in terms of generalizability, as innumerable personal histories and qualities shape my experience. In the sociology of sport (Sparkes 2000) and more generally in qualitative methodology (Ellis 1999), it has been critiqued for this narrowness and potential for self-absorption, yet advocated as a more honest (and ~~„somewhat paradoxically,~~ more artistic and enjoyable) relationship to the personal experience that qualifies all ethnographic research (Ellis 1999). Relevant to my purposes here, Sklar asserts that ‘The insights gained from a corporeal approach derive from an emphasis on depth rather than breadth, a stripping down rather than a piling up of associations’ (1994, p.18). This has guided my approach; I aim to describe and theorize the essence of how riding is for me, one particular culturally-embedded person, in moments of seamless connection between species.

### **Embodiment and attention:**

*I open the car door and crunch onto the weedy gravel. It sounds so different from pavement. The silence here is not quiet; it is speechless, but brimming with other sound. The distant whooshing of traffic seems contained in a different world. Cows mull over their cud, shifting their glossy black hides highlighted with chestnut fluff. The pattern of their dark bodies sprawls over the variegated grass that is patchy with yellow, purple, peridot, rust... a rich, fresh green that is anything but, rippling exactly as if it were some long-haired creature stroked by the wind. It is idyllic behind the barbed wire. I climb the towering flight of concrete stairs to the barn, boots producing a solid, sturdy version of high-heels clicking. Hugging my grungy sweatshirt close against the sharp wind, I watch my calves encased in leather chaps, shiny spurs*

*buckled around my ankles, looking armored and confident. The barn smells of dust, wood shavings, and alfalfa, of fur and manure and faintly of leather. Musty, yet alive. The mobile scent of outdoor air combines with the aromatic heat of stationary animal bulk. Their bodies are hidden in the obscurity of their stalls but their warmth is tangible in the air nonetheless. They mill in circles, stomp, chomp, occasionally whicker while I click-clomp up the paved aisle, tense against the chill.*

*I grab a halter; the tacky leather is supple and molds into my palm, its buckles dull, the heavy cotton rope draped over my shoulder. Horses glance as I pass, sometimes gloomily, their bodies turned away and sullen, sometimes perkily, eagerly swiveling forward their ears. Ivanna has already perked up and turned towards me by the time I slide open the clanging, grating door of her stall. Seeing her dark familiar face with its bright star, massive head reaching forward with fond attention, causes a soft pang of gratitude in my chest. I rub her cheekbones and feed her a carrot. The deeply bedded shavings sink under my feet, my steps poufing up whorls of sawdust that tickle my nose and make me sneeze. Folding back her blanket and sliding it off releases welcome heat, and I wonder if she is cold now. I do not ask her permission as I strap her head into the leather halter; cold fingers fumbling with the buckles, burrowing backwards for warmth in my sleeves once the task is accomplished. Yet there is a subtle kind of communication, an assertive assumption on my part, unhesitant yet attentive to her consent. This is wedded to domestic habit; Ivanna was feral when we first met, and her habituated attitude was cultivated over many months, turned into years.*

*Cross tied in the aisle for grooming, Ivanna fidgets. She tosses her head to make the chains clank. I brush her, flicking up tiny poufs of dust and scattered shavings that were trapped*

*under her blanket, and her flesh is smooth and firm, the muscle taut in places and fluid in others. My movements are hurried to warm me up, and my muscles are auto-pilot proficient at the grooming routine. I lean against her flank to shift her weight off the foot I'm about to pick up. Its mass rests heavily in my palm; the texture is much like a smooth rock, but that comparison never suggests itself because the hoof is warm, lively with the propensity to motion and growth. I set it down and can sense Ivanna shift her weight to prepare the next foot for picking up and picking out. I am attuned to her body with a subtle spatial awareness, something other than the slight visual modification or near-imperceptible grinding against the rubber mat.*

*Grooming finished, I run my hand over her muzzle as I walk to the saddle stand across the aisle. She blows an exaggerated breath that's not quite a snort, moist and visible in the early chill, the faint odor of chewed hay mingling with a plethora of kindred scents. I am attentive to the slight flicks of her ears and what they indicate, ready to be instantaneously responsive to any tension in her carriage. She was quite explosive when feral. I am careful to make sure she is aware of what I'm doing and tacitly consenting to it, so she isn't startled and dangerously indignant at the surprise. But despite this attention, there is not the self-consciousness I exercise with a human, the awareness of how whatever relationship we have or don't have with each other conditions our interaction. Here, my actions are functional, somehow straightforward, and I have the confidence of routine and tacit authority — though complicated by her unpredictability. I do what I am doing regardless of what Ivanna 'thinks of me', but am highly aware of what she thinks of the situation. I buckle on the saddle, hushing her in a low monotone as the girth's pressure increases, which has been a point of reactivity in the past. Do you say that a horse has trauma? Is that where her sensitivity to being cinched round the belly comes from,*



*some event in her history? Or is it 'just' unpleasant? Can you disentangle bodily sensation from memory? I reach up around her head and draw up the bridle, sliding the bit between her big teeth to the bars of her gums, which she doesn't mind in the slightest.*

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Sport horse riding, which is fundamentally a multi-species activity, occupies a border-zone between individual and social activities that serve as leisure pursuits. As complex animals, horses have a subjectivity with which riders engage, but this subjectivity is less (or at least differently) demanding than that of other humans. I do not mean to imply that horses are some kind of midway point between object and subject, though this type of language is common to Western cultural conceptions of animals (Haraway, 2008, p. 206). Rather, I am making the more specific observation that the attention riders pay horses has to account for their consciousness and alterity but not the layers of social conventions, etiquette, judgments, and abstracted meanings that overlay human interactions, and their consequent stakes. The process of learning how to pay attention to a horse can be thought of as an ethical endeavor to the extent that it is premised on an individual horse's intrinsic worth as a sentient being, an approach that fosters a mutually rewarding partnership (Dashper 2017).

Horses require attention, but of a deeply corporeal nature. On one level, this involves 'body language'. Aspects of body language that are particularly interesting, but outside the scope of this paper, include the ways horse handlers 'translate' equine herd 'language' into their own bodily comportment (Birke 2008), and the way 'confident' body language is embedded in gendered appreciations of horsemanship (Brandt 2005). Rather, this paper focuses on a different

level of corporeal attention that exceeds linguistic metaphors. When actively engaged in sport, as we will see below, such attention can be refined into a co-embodiment that bypasses the need for semiotic communication. The rider and horse share a sense of their combined embodied action in the world. Such refinement is the goal of high-level sport riding.

Co-embodiment is an aspirational ideal that is only achieved with regularity by highly skilled practitioners. However, beginners' fleeting experiences of co-embodiment can be highly motivating, as was the case in my own experience, reinforced through subsequent years of teaching lessons punctuated with joyful exclamations of 'oh, that's what it's supposed to feel like!' When learning or teaching the basics of riding, linguistic metaphors are common. Pulling on the reins in such a way 'says' halt or turn, kicking at such a moment 'tells' the horse to not stop, etc. As the rider's skill level rises, instructions from the trainer often become about the rider's body without necessarily specifying the 'message' intended by the bodily shift: 'look up' or 'let your leg hang' for example. Most riders will come to understand some kind of theory behind human motions and equine responses, but this dynamic becomes more and more implicit. Looking well in advance towards one's next jump prepares the horse to arrive there in balance; drawing in one's abdomen and lengthening one's spine in a 'half-halt' results in the horse lifting and rounding its back. The theory behind advanced techniques becomes less and less semiotic (*x means y*) and more and more sympathetic, attuned, automatic (*x is y*). I argue that this is because horse and rider come to share a sense of embodiment.

The kind of attention that yields this co-embodiment is both learned and interactive. I build on Csordas' concept of 'somatic modes of attention', which he defines as 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied

presence of others' (1993, p. 138). Bodily modes of attention are always culturally constituted — i.e. learned, neither biologically determined nor arbitrary. The long process of refining horse-human 'body language' into co-embodiment is a cultural process in which both horse and human participate (on human-animal cultural creation, communication, and knowledge production, see Haraway 2008, Smart 2011). Perception is always embedded in a cultural world, and horse and human learn to perceive each other. As to the second point, that attention is interactive, Csordas builds on Merleau-Ponty's (1962) observation that attention to something actually brings it into being. Attention is the 'existentially ambiguous point' where the object of the attention both exists as itself and as an interaction with what is attending to it (Csordas 1993, p. 138). Likewise, the object of attention shapes both the quality of the attention and the person doing the attending. Attention is always both 'to' and 'with'. It always occurs in the present moment, and indeed brings the present moment into being.

**Embodiment and union:**

*The stirrup leathers snap as I run down the irons. I cluck and gently tug on Ivanna's reins; she steps forward and halts next to the mounting block at my 'hup'. Although an observer wouldn't notice much but a smooth set of motions, I am highly attuned to Ivanna's potential action. Mounting was a primary difficulty when training her; she bucked me off before I ever sat on her back! It is difficult to even describe what 'signals' I am 'looking for' — she is now so accustomed to mounting that there are far fewer overt indications: stepping sideways, back tensing, lifted head and rolling eye. This required long patience and calm repetition from me. Now, it is more that I have a habituated readiness to notice, a continued calm attention that likely*

*reassures her. All goes smoothly and I settle into the saddle. Riding comes in intense chunks for me these days; my sore inner thighs feel the subtle knob of the stirrup bar, and I know my knees and ankles will soon complain about the extra flexion and concussion. Yet the saddle still feels like home.*

*She walks. Although I am adjusting my reins, stretching, aligning, positioning my feet, I am still ready. If she spooks at one of the swooping hawks, I will not fall. The physical qualities of a rider are subtle – I may perhaps look like someone sitting upon a horse's back, as a beginner is, but my balance is 'on', my reaction time is quick, and the reaction is the appropriate one. I am 'riding' even when I am just sitting there. I am ready, which requires both the skill of long practice and keen attention in the moment. To move from walk to trot, my calves squeeze just until she transitions, and then release, as my hip angle closes and my balance shifts slightly forward. I do not usually think about any of this though. When we are warmed up and synchronized, I simply think 'trot' and it all happens beneath conscious awareness. My legs effortlessly coordinate with the motion of her back to lift me into 'posting', my rise correctly synchronized with her outside leg moving forward, which creates more thrust than the inside leg as it travels further on the circumference of our curved path. Ages ago, my twelve-year-old self shed frustrated tears over the impossibility of finding this rhythm.*

*Sometimes while riding my thoughts are elsewhere. I can go on 'auto-pilot' and rely on physical memory while my 'mind' wanders. But this is simply habit, not co-embodiment. Co-embodiment requires attention, and it is not just the rider who has to pay attention, either. Ivanna is like a diesel truck, I tell people. She takes a very long warm up before her engine is primed and self-sufficient. Now that she is advanced so far into domesticity and no longer on the feral*

*edge, getting her to pay attention can be trying. 'Motivate, don't nag!' trainers tell me. Easier said than done. But when she is fit and fluid her legs do really seem like pistons, generating energy that loops up from her hind hooves through her back, through me, down through her neck and bit, and back up again. I feel like this energy is somehow contained between my legs and hands, in me as well as in her; a force comprised of us both, by which we are both carried along. I can hear her piston-rhythm accelerating, the trot collapsing into a run, energy loop broken as her front feet pound, dissipating it into the ground. I lift my bellybutton up into my spine, roll back my shoulders and tuck my pelvis, lifting her 1500 pound weight back onto her haunches, generating more energy through pulsing squeezes of my calves, bringing the energy back into a loop. I lift my inside rein — maybe not even an inch, maybe just the thought of it — to keep her vertical balance around the curve, hold her there upright between my lifted left hand and supporting right leg, and just as her right hind hoof lifts I press my right heel towards her belly, and her hoof lands in the first footfall of the canter. From two beats to three: waltz tempo.*

*Ivanna and I canter, and it feels like we are an enormous featherweight rocking chair. That is, until the pieces fall apart again, to be rebalanced, soon to be distracted, soon to be re-attuned, constantly in the process of refinement. A rider must have muscular power in the legs, the arms, the torso, but her real physical ability is being strong in subtlety, in holding herself perfectly in balance throughout all the intense motion of galloping and leaping and prancing sideways, appearing still. My gaze softens to the middle-distance as I tune-in to Ivanna's footfalls, her alignment, the quality of her energy. Her forward motion flags and the arc of her spine becomes wiggly as her energy threatens to flop out to the sides; a nudge with my seat and tap with both ankles drives her forward and straight. She pounds the ground and it pushes back;*

*I feel the pounding course through my ankles in rhythm with her regular snorty breath, and my own breath is controlled and rhythmic as well. I lift my seat out of the saddle and encourage her to open her stride into a gallop. I am aware of my lower back muscles holding me upright, and I remind myself not to compress my left side in my inclination to asymmetry. My head turns to calibrate the corner, automatically adjusting the relative balance of our bodies' alignment to make her speed coincide with the calibration. It is at once an experience of rapidity as the fence posts flash by and her staccato hoof beats become indistinct, and of tranquility as my gaze takes in the panoramic countryside, the hawk floating lazily at our pace. I roll back my shoulders, open my hip angle, and sink my weight into my heels, closing my fingers around the reins. We come back to a walk, though I am careful to keep my body active so Ivanna doesn't simply 'collapse' into the slower gait. Attunement is a never-ending process. The scent of sweat rises, mingling with dust, and I relax my body and release the reins, allowing Ivanna to stretch her neck down and snuffle the sand.*

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At what point does the horse and rider bodily conversation and negotiation become co-embodiment? Is it a spectrum of subtlety? An open-ended progress? Perhaps. What is clear to me is that we *can* become so engaged in what we are attempting to do together that communication is refined to the point of seamless connection, if only for a brief moment. Co-embodiment requires paying focused attention: immediacy. Such attention, if mutual, enables a unified engagement with the world: intimacy. In the intimacy and immediacy of that connection, we transcend all the detailed, sensitive work taking place between our bodies. Co-embodiment

happens when the cues by which the rider signals her intention become so subtle they are subconscious, and her awareness of the horse's intentions becomes so subtle that she subconsciously anticipates his actions, rather than reacting to them. I will not attempt to project onto the specifics of the horse's experience, but he must likewise be subtly engaged.

While horse and rider are often thought of as partners (Wipper 2000, Birke 2008), the (albeit fleeting) experience of co-embodiment doesn't seem accurately described as partnership or teamwork, which evokes one consciousness communicating across a gulf to another consciousness so they can direct their respective bodies toward a shared goal. Co-embodiment builds on a learned relationship, based on mutual respect, trust, confidence, and close communication as well as compatibility (Wipper 2000), but then transcends it. In such moments, I know where each of my horse's feet are with the same proprioceptive sense that enables awareness of my own feet, without 'thinking' about it. I may make conscious technical decisions about direction or speed, as I would while walking or running, but I communicate them subconsciously to my horse, as I would communicate them to my own legs. It is a union.

What is a sense of embodiment, such that it can be shared? The concept of a body schema (sometimes also called body image) is one way to theorize this. Elizabeth Grosz describes the body schema as 'an anticipatory plan of (future) action in which a knowledge of the body's current position and capacities for action must be registered' and thus 'formed out of the various modes of contact the subject has with its environment through its actions in the world' (Grosz, 1994, pp. 67-68). Body schema is the link between perception and action; it is, in effect, the perception of one's possibilities for interacting with the world. It allows actions to happen without any transfer between 'mind' and 'body'; the two are co-constituted as the self is engaged

in the world. The body schema is learned over time, based on habits of perception and action. This is why sharing a body schema is only possible in expert horse-rider interactions, where both parties have long experience with the other's capacities and likelihoods.

The body schema is responsible for the 'phantom limb' that affects amputee patients who continue to perceive and take action with a part of their body that is missing physically. Conversely, the success of a prosthesis depends on the body schema literally incorporating the new piece of body. Prosthetics can be considered expansively to include not just substitutes for 'defects' (such as artificial limbs) but anything that augments bodily capacities (Grosz 2005). When one's body schema includes a pair of habitually-worn glasses, one allows extra space for their edges when maneuvering one's head. A novice bicyclist has to think of making particular motions, say turning the handlebars to avoid an obstacle, but when cycling becomes automatic one fluidly moves past obstacles as a unit with the bicycle. If this tool is used to differently enable one's body, if it is incorporated into one's assumed-without-conscious-thought possibilities for interacting in the world, is it not then a part of the person? Jean-Paul Sartre answers: "my body always extends across the tool which it utilizes: it is at the end of the cane on which I lean and against the earth; it is at the end of the telescope which shows me the stars..." (1984, p. 428). One can subsume parts of the world into one's conception of self, expanding one's capacities, blurring one's edges (Stone 1994).

But a horse is not a tool. Although Grosz proposes that prosthetic objects may be transformed alongside the body that incorporates them in a 'mutual metamorphosis', provocatively suggesting more agency than typically granted to these inanimate objects (2005, p. 148), a complex mammal like a horse has a consciousness that is relatively easily recognizable



by humans. Extending one's body schema to incorporate a horse is much more elusive than for a bicycle. The metaphor of the prosthetic has to become more complicated, as this 'object' fairly explicitly 'talks back' through its own voluntary motions in the world. For Aristotle, motion was the primary condition for consciousness and selfhood, not thought as in the Cartesian legacy; the body's 'animation' by *anima*, or spirit, was the pre-condition of its existence (Sheets-Johnston 1999). Sharing a body schema with a horse requires not only disciplined practice and skill-learning that create cultural habits and quick reactions, not only a focused bodily attention, but sensitivity and empathetic connection with another spirit. Again, this builds on having established a partnership, but exceeds it. Animal science research has shown what any horse person knows: not only can horses remember humans in ways that impact their subsequent interaction (Fureix, Jegou, Sankey, Hausberger 2009), a bond emerging from successive interactions that set 'positive' or 'negative' expectations (Hausberger, Roche, Henry, and Visser 2008), but emotions like anxiety are communicated between human and equine bodies in real time when executing even simple tasks together (Keeling, Jonare, and Lanneborn 2009). Grosz notes that the body schema is 'also comprised of various emotional and libidinal attitudes' and that 'the subject's experience of its own body is connected to and mediated by others' relations to their own bodies and to the subject's body' (1994, pp. 67-68).

In her description of emotional intersubjectivity with the racehorses she rides, Deborah Butler builds on Merleau-Ponty's (2003) idea of a human-animal 'intertwining', a lateral relationship of overcoming or transgression based on 'the body's openness of being, its ability to touch and be touched, its ability to be both perceiver and perceived, and to communicate nonlinguistically' (Butler 2017, p. 129). This intertwining of sentient beings, or primordial

intercorporeality, is ‘a shared belonging of the reversible flesh of the world... a reversibility between myself and an other... an “intentional tissue”, a meaningful flow of sensual and haptic communication’ (p. 132). She describes how this profound connection can be a catalyst for recovering from emotional imbalance and poor mental health. However, she says ‘What we do not achieve, however close and embodied our relationship with an other might be, is to meld into one. Our experiences lived through our bodies are our own, there is an irremediable space between us’ (p. 127). While I agree that no durable melding can occur, I argue by contrast that moments of profound connection such as she herself describes can indeed be described as union.

Other theorists have described such an embodied-emotional union. Beth Seaton (2013), referencing Merleau-Ponty (1968), discusses how communications ‘amongst the actors of human and non-human worlds involve sensate, kinaesthetic and mindful exchanges of identity. They involve the extensions of body and thought in which emotional and sensory registers act in harmony as material and mindful orientations, allowing the anticipation or intuition of the future movements and emotions of an other which, in some form, may also become like-minded’. She illustrates with an evocative description of riding:

When my horse and I are riding in balance with one another (which we must be), we share a synchronicity of emotion, perspective and movement. When I am taking him through a jumping course, I must look forward towards our immediate destination as he would look forward (looking at the ground is a sure means of falling to the ground); I must measure the distance and count his strides to the next jump and in counting his movements to myself I am communicating to him how many strides he needs to take (and he does). I need only think about these movements we will next perform, and if I am successful in my thinking, if I am successful in becoming like him, my horse will perform them. If, on the other hand, I am feeling out-of-sorts, if I am stressed or anxious, my horse will react in kind and become tense and spooky. If I miss our count of strides, my horse may, quite possibly, crash into the fence. Similarly, if my horse is overly excited or fearful, then I can have great difficulty in finding that necessary muscular-

emotional connection and will have to work very hard at communicating a loose and easy body and mind in order for him to relax.

Vinciane Despret refers to this affinity between horse and rider as ‘iso-praxis’ (2004, p. 115), a type of body and mind mimicry in which not only do horses respond to their riders, but talented riders behave and move like horses. The riders ‘have learned to act in a horse-like fashion, which may explain how horses may be so well attuned to their humans, and how mere thought from one may simultaneously induce the other to move. Human bodies have been transformed by and into a horse’s body’ (p. 115). Intentions become intertwined, and both human and horse are cause and effect of each other’s movements. ‘Both embody each other’s mind’ (*ibid*).

Using the centaur as a mythic figure or archetype accessible to humans on an unconscious level, Ann Game (2001) likewise proposes ‘that we are always already part horse, and horses, part human... Through interconnectedness, through our participation in the life of the world, humans are always forever mixed, and thus too have what could be described as a capacity for horseness’ (1). She describes how ‘When a horse moves freely, balanced, with cadence and lightness, it feels like floating and flying. Ecstatic. These moments of effortless airy floating, flying, so light yet requiring perfect placing of the hooves on the ground... are the moments we ride for’ (3). What might be called the ‘centaur effect’ is the ‘ecstatic quality of good riding’ (*ibid*), a spiritual exhilaration, ‘a feeling that energies have been set free in us that are superior to those that are ordinarily at our command’ (*ibid*). Social theorists and their informants describe feelings of oneness during riding as “mutual becomings” (Oma 2007), and use terms that evoke telepathy or metaphysics, a transcendent connection with something larger

than the self (Brown 2007). In England a secret “horseman’s word” was said to convey powers over horses when whispered in their ears: it was “both in one” (Evans 2008, p. 246).

In her beautiful inquiry into why such esoteric, mystical descriptions of human-horse interaction are remarkably widespread across time and geography, archaeologist Gala Argent (2012) begins with nonverbal communication as a profoundly important capacity of both horses and humans that is too-often discounted as secondary to human verbal capacities. Both species’ ability to communicate nonverbally amongst ourselves (intra-specifically) is what allows us to do so between species (inter-specifically), she claims. Both haptics (touch) and proxemics (spatial positioning) are essential to horse socialization, and they cultivate affection and bonding with particular individuals. Argent suggests horses have a desire to please, and a superior ability to assess intentionality, which allows them to anticipate a rider even before being “asked.” Quoting Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2002), she adds that humans, for our part, “engage in corporeal-kinetic sense-makings” to create an intercorporeal world of common understandings (Argent 2012, pp. 114). Horse herds move as one organism, and draft teams and mare-foal dyads often synchronize footfalls; this capacity for corporeal synchrony extends to horse-human dyads. Argent uses anthropologist Edward Hall’s idea of entrainment (1983) to focus on the internal processes that make manifest observable synchronization possible, wherein nervous systems affect and motivate each other, causing a “corporeal-synchrony induced sensation of boundary loss” (Argent 2012, pp. 121). Human religious and communal ritual often involves collective emotion and motion, which produces feelings of pleasure, elation, and transcendence. Dance, music, sports, and marches involve boundary loss, transcendence of the individual through rhythm, and ecstatic expansion. Argent closes by proposing that such pleasures in merging are

not only available to the human part of the horse-human pair; to give the horse its full agency (while noting that animal exploitation and domination certainly exist), we should allow for the possibility that horse-human synchrony and entrainment — what I am calling interspecies co-embodiment — works because horses actively enjoy and seek out such corporeal-affective transcendence, as well. Achieving such an intimate, exhilarating union requires the empathetic corporeal receptivity Argent describes, as well as fully engaged attention. Horses often insist on keen attention: from a ‘green’ untrained colt who is unpredictable and therefore dangerous, to a ‘hot’ high-energy mare who is easily distracted, to a refined upper-level horse who becomes frustrated with rider sloppiness that blocks his ability to be responsive. When really attending to a horse I am working with, I am fully implicated in the experience, and not with my ego. If communication breaks down, calling it a misbehavior, ‘taking it personally’, or exerting angry dominance are counterproductive. Furthermore, if I am really paying attention, doing so becomes nonsensical. This attentive presence has many overlaps with what is popularly theorized as “flow,” the state in which a person gets so involved in an activity and it is so completely enjoyable that nothing else seems to matter, often resulting in optimal performance (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Flow requires clear and challenging goals balanced against the skills required to meet them; once achieved, flow is characterized by total concentration, a loss of self-consciousness, a merging of action and awareness such that the activity almost feels automatic, a sense of heightened control, a distortion of time, and/or a feeling that the activity is intrinsically rewarding (Swann, Keegan, Piggott, & Crust 2012). Flow, in turn, has many overlaps with “mindfulness” and thus evokes affective training as well as technical capacities (Kaufman, Glass, & Pineau 2018). Yet sport riding requires achieving flow with another being. It requires being *in*

*relationship*, and such relationality can itself achieve a flow state. Flow in sport riding, then, involves both optimal performance at the task (dancing the dressage, jumping the jumps), and optimal performance at the relationship that enables the task. To be in relationship, even for short amounts of time, can be emotionally challenging. It is difficult to assert agency while acknowledging one's vulnerability, to be both enabled by the relationship and dependent on it, to pay true attention to another — but, arguably, more straightforward with an animal than a human, which is sport riding's unique appeal. For all its challenges, being in relationship is deeply rewarding, and sport riding allows doing so in exclusively non-verbal ways. Is this reward-challenge work or play? Does the difference exist from a horse's perspective?

**Conclusion:**

*It feels somewhere between exhaustion and elation. Feeling spent, but energized. Like uneasy excesses of energy have been siphoned off, and whatever calm, grounded energetic resources were underneath all that anxiety have been freed. Of course, on some days the feeling after riding is not so transformative. Of course, frustration and discontent and breakdown are part of the pursuit, as well. But the feeling of getting it right is rejuvenating enough and frequent enough to be highly rewarding in and of itself. I have never cared much for prizes or competition, at least not in riding. The feeling of union is what motivates me. And I can find it with novice 'green' horses as well as highly schooled ones — indeed, sometimes horses new to the game are more attentive than experienced ones who may have become bored with it or dulled to subtlety by repeated bad riding. And indeed, an untrained horse's reactivity forces my attention to the immediate moment: walking delicately on the edge of explosion, the world*

*reduces to that one connection, and I am infinitely patient. In a life full of multi-tasking, to have even a brief moment of absolute concentration can feel profound. In a life governed by words, thoughts, and symbols, to sink into sensory kinesthetic awareness can be a relief. In a life where connection with another can seem inevitably fraught or shallow, to feel unified can unleash elation.*

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Sport riding can be considered the pursuit of interspecies co-embodiment, in which two distinct beings merge in an experience of heightened immediacy and intimacy. This bridging of consciousness during the concerted pursuit of a challenging activity, fleeting and aspirational though it may be, is, on the one hand, a counterpoint to the alienated and scattered experience that can characterize modern life, and on the other hand, bypasses the reliance on the verbal that characterizes much human sociality. These experiences are, I argue, a significant part of the appeal of sport horse riding as leisure. It is an ‘escape’ not just from ‘work’ or ‘social life’, but from any number of unpleasant qualities attending contemporary life in wealthy capitalist societies: ennui, isolation, distraction, anxiety, loneliness, anthropocentrism and separation from ‘nature’. I am not suggesting that people need to feel miserable to be attracted to sport riding, quite the contrary; being engaged in sport riding is perhaps an effective way of mitigating potential disaffection and maintaining a wellbeing of the spirit. It is both the interspecies aspect of the sport, and the sport aspect of the interspecies engagement, that enables these unique characteristics.

Of course, there are other reasons people find riding appealing that may supplement or replace the immediacy and intimacy I am discussing. Human-horse relationships can foster mutual well-being and companionship in a more quotidian sense (Birke and Creighton 2010), and provide ‘therapy’ for stress, in an interesting medicalization of pleasure (Davis, Maurstad, and Dean 2015). There are social relationships with other riders, with important gendered aspects. Horses can be a way of life, a lifestyle accessory, an identity or trend (Latimer and Birke 2009). Bodily engagement with horses has specific appeal for women, who often learn fraught relationships with their own bodies (Dashper 2016, Birke and Brandt 2009, Brandt 2005). This positive quality can override parents’ concerns about the sport’s risks to their horse-crazy daughters (Sanchez 2016). Exploring the ways these various aspects work together to attract and retain enthusiasts, and elaborating on aspects that make the sport unappealing to people who otherwise have the time, resources, and embodied ability to pursue it as leisure, are directions for further research.

As a teenage female rider, I heard a quip that stuck with me, proclaiming that ‘A girl needs something to love when she is too old for dolls and too young for boys — a horse is good’. While I certainly appreciate the grounding, strengthening effect that riding and horse companionship can have when grappling with ‘femininity’ during turbulent teenage years, I marvel at how neatly this quip posits the animal as in-between inanimate object and human subject. Rather, I argue that a relationship of immediacy and intimacy with a sport horse reminds us that bodily material and mindful selfhood are one and the same. The body is the source of our capacity for connection and presence, both with another and with ourselves. In many human social interactions in contemporary Western societies, bodily engagement is fraught,



circumscribed, or ignored. Physical challenges in sports do not often involve profound connections with others. Sport riding combines physical challenge and connection with another being, which is an important aspect of its current cultural relevance. It offers permission to embrace the corporeal and receptive nature of selfhood in the present moment.

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